



RentSafe Update

June 2017

Introduction

Over the past two years, the RentSafe Project Team and other partner organizations have been carrying out baseline research to: better understand tenants' experiences with unhealthy housing conditions and their efforts to get help; gain insight into the capacity and approaches of the various agencies/sectors that are, or could be, in a position to address unhealthy conditions in rental housing; and learn about the experiences and perspectives of landlords. These efforts are summarized below. Since the April 2016 RentSafe Update (the content of which is repeated below), new research activities include the completion of the RentSafe survey of frontline workers, a survey of small-scale landlords and several landlord focus groups.

RentSafe partners are also working to support information sharing, capacity building and advocacy efforts, including presenting at conferences, webinars and other training opportunities for relevant service providers. Initial steps have been taken in the development of a training video for service providers about the connections between housing and health, and ways to strengthen the support they provide to people experiencing unhealthy rental housing conditions. RentSafe partners are collaborating with tenant advocates to improve awareness of and action on housing conditions. A meeting among tenants involved in housing advocacy in rural communities is being planned for Fall 2017.

■ Focus groups with tenants

Focus groups with tenants on low-income were held in urban and rural regions of Ontario from June to August 2015, with a total of 80 participants. Four focus groups were held in Toronto, led by Toronto Public Health and South Riverdale Community Health Centre, 3 focus groups were held in the Grey Bruce region, led by the Grey Bruce Health Unit, and 2 focus groups were held in Lanark County, hosted by The Table Community Food Centre in Perth. Key findings include:

- Tenants reported multiple indoor environmental health issues in their housing units, including water and sewage leaks, mould, pests, poor ventilation, structural issues (e.g. broken doors, windows), broken/unsafe appliances, improper wiring, and security concerns.
- Tenants also talked about problems with landlords/building managers, including disrespect, intimidation, racism, and unreasonable requests to remediate problems on their own.
- Tenants suffer adverse physical/mental/social health impacts as a result of substandard housing.
- Tenants reported approaching multiple agencies/personnel for assistance (e.g., municipal licensing and standards, public health, housing workers, legal aid clinics, social workers, tenant committees, municipal Councilors, community health centres, family doctors); some met with success in resolving their concerns but many received only partial/temporary resolution ("band-aid" repairs) or no resolution, resulting in frustration and discouragement. Mitigation of substandard housing conditions is hampered by landlord apathy, unclear/unenforced standards, and an overwhelming Landlord-Tenant Board process.
- Rural aspects include stigmatization ("black-listing" of tenants) and transportation barriers.
- Tenants put forth ideas on opportunities for improvement in the realms of regulation and enforcement, education (e.g., in tenants' and landlords' rights and

"Multiple levels of people to deal with – there's so much bureaucracy, it will never get solved."

"Tenants aren't in proper emotional place to jump through lots of hoops."

"When you get beat down so much, you can only take so much."

"I did not know my rights, I did not know how to go about it, so my kids and I became homeless. I learned through the process there's different ways to go. ...[U]sing my voice to [say] to others hey, try this route..."

- RentSafe tenant focus group participants

responsibilities), navigation (e.g., effective direction/referral of tenants, creation of an ombudsperson role) and coordination among agencies/personnel.

▪ **Public health unit (PHU) survey**

The PHU survey was completed in October 2015, with responses received from all 36 of Ontario's public health units. Survey responses revealed wide variability in how PHUs interpret their mandate for responding to complaints about housing conditions, and varying degree of focus on health equity concerns and the needs of marginalized tenants. Key findings include:

- Most PHUs provide informational materials and over-the-phone consultations in response to indoor environmental health complaints.
- Over half of PHUs conduct on-site investigations for sewage, water issues, hoarding and mould; very few PHUs conduct on-site investigations for structural issues, thermal comfort (too hot/too cold), pesticides, and radon.
- Nearly three-quarters of PHUs refer issues to the building department or by-law enforcement; most (86%) rarely or never refer issues to legal aid; fewer than half feel that they always know where to refer the client.
- Fewer than half (47%) of PHUs feel they have adequate capacity and expertise to respond to indoor environmental health issues; most feel that confounding factors (e.g., mental health issues) challenge their ability to respond effectively.
- Fewer than half of PHUs believe that the majority of indoor environmental health concerns fall within their mandate.
- Approximately three-quarters of PHUs agree that housing conditions adversely affect the health of marginalized populations; fewer than half agree that this is a priority for their health unit; fewer than half of Ontario's PHUs have internal policies that address substandard housing issues for marginalized populations.
- Approx. half of PHUs are developing public policies to address inequities associated with access to safe, affordable & healthy housing.

"We are working well with partners...but more collaboration and awareness is needed to identify and address confounding factors e.g. mental health, hoarding, low-income, inadequate supply of safe, healthy rental housing, seniors issues, new immigrants"

- RentSafe PHU survey respondent

The survey was led by Helen Doyle, York Region Public Health and Chair of the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) Environmental Health Work Group, and Bob Hart, Grey Bruce Health Unit (GBHU), with survey analysis and report preparation provided by Lindsay MacDermid as an in-kind contribution from GBHU. The report is available at <http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/resources/rentsafe-public-health-unit-survey-summary-report>

▪ **Survey of legal aid clinics and case law review**

The RentSafe survey of legal aid clinics across Ontario was completed in November 2015, with responses received from 71 percent of Ontario's 80 legal aid clinics. The aim of the survey was to assess clinics' response to indoor environmental health issues in rental housing. Key findings include:

- Pests, mould, structural issues are the most common issues raised, followed by noise, inadequate heating, hoarding, and flooding; other issues occasionally/rarely come up.
- Approximately three-quarters of clinics often use Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO) or other informational resources (e.g., PHU, Landlord Tenant Board (LTB) resources); over 80% of respondents see a need for new/updated resources (addressing mould in particular, as well as pests, hoarding).
- Respondents noted many barriers facing tenants. The top 3 barriers cited were: fear of eviction; fear of need to move/pay higher rent for necessary repairs; and not knowing whom to call. Mental health was also noted as key barrier.
- Clinics most frequently make referrals to local by-law enforcement, the landlord, local PHU; more than 70% lack time to follow-up, and approximately 50% lack confidence that referrals will address concerns.
- Approximately 60% of respondents disagree that LTB repair orders will be enforced.

"We are so busy dealing with eviction cases we do not have time for repair issues."

"[For] bed bugs, most tenants, especially on Social Assistance, do not have the financial means to deal with the issue; [ability to do laundering, etc.]"

"Many clients cannot read or write or are computer illiterate so it is difficult for them to access information about their rights."

"Tenants would rather move than deal with the issues."

- RentSafe legal aid survey respondents **2**

- Regarding clinics' capacity to respond to these issues, the most commonly cited challenge (~80%) was confounding factors (e.g., mental health, landlord-tenant relationship, and hoarding); other commonly cited challenges were: finding and paying for experts; getting PHU involved in addressing issues; lack of follow-up by LTB to enforce repair orders.
- More than 80% of respondents agree there is a need for effective implementation of local bylaws and the Health Protection and Promotion Act.
- More than 90% of respondents agree that the *Residential Tenancies Act* should require provision of healthy rental housing.

The survey was led by Kathy Cooper, Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA), with survey analysis and report preparation provided by Lindsay MacDermid. The report is available at: <http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/resources/rentsafe-legal-aid-survey-summary-report>

Parallel to the survey of legal aid clinics, CELA is conducting a case law review to assess whether and how indoor environmental health issues are addressed by tribunals and courts. The review will encompass the *Residential Tenancies Act*, decisions of the Landlord and Tenant Board and case law where there is judicial review of tribunal decisions, as well as aspects of the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*, the *Ontario Human Rights Code* and, to some degree, local property standards and bylaws.

Taken together, the legal aid clinic survey results and the case law review will inform recommendations for law reform and public legal education.

▪ **Municipal inspectors survey and focus groups**

As part of the Above Standard Housing initiative led by the Grey Bruce Poverty Task Force and as a contribution to RentSafe baseline research, Bob Hart and colleagues at the Grey Bruce Health Unit (a CPCHE affiliate) conducted a survey of municipal inspectors in the region, followed by focus groups with municipal and public health inspectors. Key findings include:

- significant overlap in the types of housing complaints received by municipalities and public health,
- significant uncertainty about the applicability of specific legislation in dealing with housing complaints,
- challenges specific to rural areas such as : multiple municipalities with small operating budgets, different by-laws and different perceptions of the importance of the issue, and
- interest among municipal inspectors to partner with public health to explore solutions.

GBHU is currently organizing a joint inspection pilot involving both public health and municipal inspectors.

RentSafe partners are also exploring the feasibility of a province-wide RentSafe survey of municipal/by-law inspectors, similar to the above-described surveys undertaken with other sectors.

▪ **Survey of frontline workers /direct service providers**

As a result of the learnings from the tenant focus groups and PHU and legal aid surveys, the RentSafe Project Team identified the need to directly engage with "front-line" service providers such as public health nurses, housing support workers, social workers, etc. in order to get their perspectives on the issues and challenges faced by tenants on low-income in terms of housing conditions and their efforts to get help, and to better understand the current and potential capacities and interests among front-line staff to serve as a source of information and support for tenants on such issues. The survey of front-line staff was led by Caryn Thompson at South Riverdale Community Health Centre (SRCHC).

A draft survey was piloted with relevant staff at SRCHC in the spring of 2016 and ethics approval was received through Queen's University. The final online survey targeting staff who work directly with tenants living on low income in Ontario was disseminated in the fall of 2016 via a diverse array of formal and informal network and provincial professional associations. The survey questions covered the frequency of concerns brought to their attention; awareness of environmental health concerns in housing; how they currently support clients, including where to refer clients for assistance; and what supports/strategies would be helpful. Approximately 450 frontline staff from across Ontario completed the survey.

In terms of key findings, 96% of respondents had worked with clients who have experienced unhealthy conditions in their rental housing. Ninety-one percent of participants agreed that substandard housing conditions are adversely affecting the physical/mental health of the clients whom their organization serves.

In terms of capacity, 88% of respondents agreed that frontline workers like themselves have a role to play in supporting tenants in seeking resolution of unhealthy housing conditions, but only one quarter feel that they have the resources (i.e. time, budget) to do so. The majority of respondents make referrals to other agencies to assist their clients in resolving unhealthy housing conditions, but only 30% are confident that clients' concerns are adequately addressed when they make referrals.

Respondents identified a need for: more comprehensive information on what constitutes unhealthy housing and proper channels to refer clients; online training course on tenant rights and relevant laws and regulations; and real-world scenarios and strategies to improve skills to advocate for clients. Information from the frontline workers survey will inform next steps in the RentSafe project including the development of a video for direct service providers which is currently in the works.

▪ **Landlord survey and focus groups**

○ **Focus groups with landlords in Grey Bruce**

Grey Bruce Health Unit, as part of the Above Standard Housing initiative and as input into RentSafe, conducted focus groups with local private landlords (2017) and will do with public housing providers in 2018, who either provide housing directly to vulnerable populations or sub-contract with private landlords. Key findings from the sessions:

- Landlords report challenges in securing affordable maintenance and repair services, with subsequent challenges in keeping rental rates low
- Landlords noted their lack of preparedness/skills in addressing the challenges that sometimes arise in providing housing to people living with mental illness and/or addictions. They suggested that intervention/mediation strategies involving relevant social service agencies could be of value when landlord-tenant issues arise in such situations.

○ **RentSafe survey of small-scale landlords**

The Centre for Environmental Health Equity (CEHE) in collaboration with the Landlord's Self Help Centre (LSHC) and CPCHE conducted an online survey to explore the experiences of Ontarian small-scale landlords in maintaining healthy housing conditions. Approximately 120 landlords responded to the survey, which was issued via the LSHC's contact lists in March 2017. Results from this survey will inform ideas on how to better support small landlords in maintaining healthy rental properties. A report summarizing responses from this survey is in development.

▪ **RentSafe presentations and events:**

The [RentSafe Roundtable](#), held in Hamilton at McMaster University in November 2016, brought together more than 80 participants from multiple sectors, including tenants, landlords, service providers, academics and government officials, to review the RentSafe findings to date and discuss priorities for action. The [summary report](#) and [presentations](#) are available on the RentSafe project page. A short whiteboard video entitled "[Home](#)," which reflects tenants' experiences with unhealthy housing conditions and efforts to get help, was launched at the Roundtable session.

Following is an overview of recent and upcoming events in which RentSafe has been/will be featured:

- Erica Phipps gave a presentation on RentSafe, in collaboration with Jeff Masuda, CEHE, at the annual meeting of the American Association of Geographers in Boston in April 2017.
- Helen Doyle was a guest lecturer at Ryerson University in April 2017, presenting on the RentSafe initiative to environmental health students in the Housing course, in the context of their studies on health equity, public health and property standards relating to housing.
- The Grey Bruce Health Unit presented in April 2017 to the southwest chapter of the Ontario Association of Property Standards Officers about the relationship between housing and health and the role for public health and property standards. The RentSafe video, *Home* was shown as

the introduction to the presentation. The association was very receptive to the idea of strengthening ties between local public health and property standards.

- Erica Phipps and Carlos Sanchez, CEHE/Queen's University, presented a [poster](#) at The Ontario Public Health Convention (TOPHC), Toronto, March 2017, on the preliminary results of the RentSafe survey of small-scale landlords.
- Erica Phipps presented on RentSafe and the links between housing and health during a day-long [preconference session on preconception health](#) at the Best Start conference (February 2017, Toronto) an annual event that brings together hundreds of early years professionals from Ontario and across Canada.
- RentSafe was used as an example of how complex, intersectoral connections can evolve both formally and informally to create powerful opportunities for collective action during a panel session on the value of Collective Impact strategies in community development initiatives, convened at the Grey Bruce Healthy Partnerships Breakfast, a monthly event that brings together local businesses, social services agencies, governments, educators, politicians and citizens to brainstorm community issues.
- Kathy Cooper, CELA, presented on RentSafe at the Legal Clinic Housing Issues Committee meeting in January 2017.
- Erica Phipps presented on RentSafe during a January 2016 [webinar](#) organized by the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health and hosted by CHNET-Works! to an audience of approximately 240 people across Canada
- RentSafe team members Erica Phipps, Jill McDowell, Bob Hart, Kathy Cooper, Helen Doyle and Caryn Thompson held a 90-minute [panel presentation](#) and discussion at The Ontario Public Health Convention (TOPHC) in Toronto, April 2016, entitled *RentSafe: Intersectoral Action Towards Healthy Housing for Low-income Tenants in Ontario*
- RentSafe team members Vittoria Vecchiarelli (York Region Public Health), Bob Hart, GBHU, and Erica Phipps presented a poster on the RentSafe Public Health Unit survey and related efforts to engage with the public health sector at the June 2016 CPHA conference in Toronto

Upcoming events:

- Legal Aid Services-Grey Bruce will be holding a Residential Tenancy Act training/information session for Community Voices members in summer 2017. The session seeks to empower participants to act as peer advocates – providing information to other tenants regarding landlord/tenant rights, communicating effectively with landlords, and working with Legal Aid Services should a dispute arise.
- Kathy Cooper is planning to hold RentSafe sessions at regional legal clinic training events during 2017.
- RentSafe was selected for a presentation at the 2017 Ontario conference of the Canadian Institute for Public Health Inspectors (CIPHI) on October 3, 2017.

■ RentSafe Advisory Committee

The RentSafe Project Team is pleased to welcome the following new members of the RentSafe Advisory Committee: Tanya Butt, Nadine Desjardins, Greg Nicol, Katie Plaizier and Greg Suttor. A RentSafe Advisory Committee teleconference is scheduled for **June 6th, from 2:00 – 3:00 pm.**

■ RentSafe Knowledge-to-Action Initiative

Erica Phipps and Jeff Masuda at the Centre for Environmental Health Equity (Queen's University) have been awarded a 2-year Knowledge to Action grant by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research for community-based research involving tenant advocates and other stakeholders in Owen Sound and the Grey-Bruce region, addressing housing conditions, health equity and social justice. The project, which forms the basis for Erica's PhD research, will get underway this year, and will include tenant-led advocacy and the convening of multiple sectors (housing providers, government officials, local organizations and residents) in a multi-day workshop aimed at breaking down barriers to inter-sectoral communication and action. Partners include the Grey Bruce Health Unit, the Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force, Community Voices, M'Wikwedong Native Cultural Resource Centre, the Health and Environment Analysis Laboratory at the University of Ottawa, and the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health.

■ Ongoing activities for 2017-2018

The initial three years of RentSafe funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation will wrap up in early 2018. Over the coming year, the following activities will be completed:

- RentSafe baseline report. An initial version of the report served as the [discussion paper](#) for the RentSafe Roundtable (November 2016). The report will be further developed based on input from Roundtable participants and to reflect the outcomes of ongoing RentSafe research and collaborations.
- Video for service providers: RentSafe team members and other partners are working together to develop a brief video for service providers, intended for use in staff training, webinars, conferences and other learning opportunities. The video will address the links between housing and health, and explore ways to strengthen the supports provided to people experiencing unhealthy rental housing conditions.
- Support for tenant advocacy: A meeting among tenant advocacy teams working in Owen Sound, Perth and Stratford is being organized for Fall 2017 (tbc), as an opportunity to discuss housing quality issues experienced by people in rural and small town contexts, and to share strategies for awareness-raising and advocacy including development of outreach/advocacy materials/tools.

The RentSafe Project Team and CPCHE partners will also be focusing on a strategic direction for RentSafe into the future, and associated efforts to secure funding.

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RentSafe is an initiative of the
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with the **Environmental Health Institute of Canada**
serving as the lead CPCHE partner organization

and with active involvement of many collaborating organizations and
sectors

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